

Mindfulness and Poetry

“...only when looked at from a place of asideness and exile
does the life of the world step fully forward.”

Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*

David Arnold

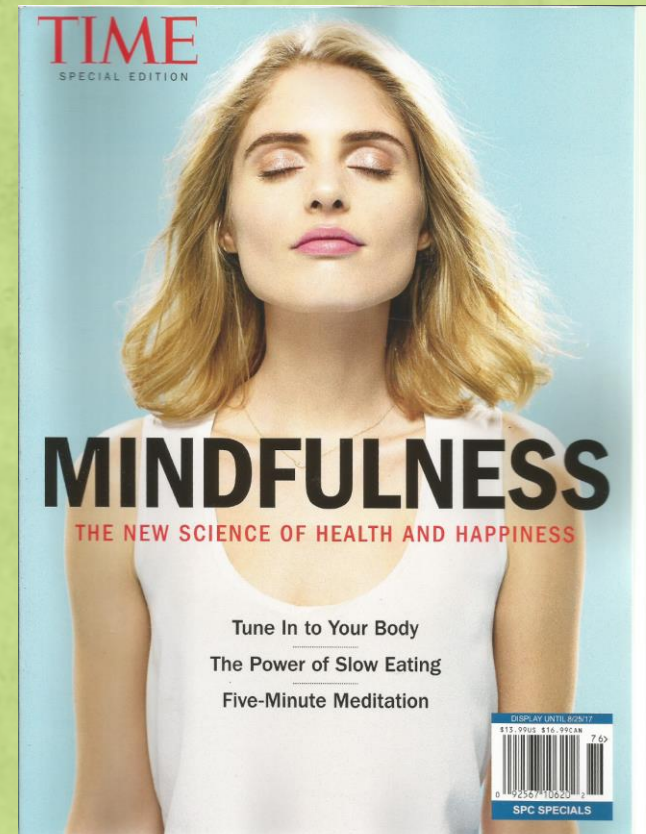
University of Worcester

The Mindfulness 'Revolution'

- “To be mindful is to be aware of your own experience, moment to moment, without judgement.”
- “Mindfulness is a therapeutic technique that can help you manage and prevent feelings of depression, stress, anxiety, or discontent. It enables anyone who practices it to live a more attentive, appreciative and vibrant life.”

[Homepage, Oxford Mindfulness Centre,

<https://www.oxfordmindfulness.org/>]





Mainstream Mindfulness



- Advocated by celebrities – Oprah Winfrey, Goldie Hawn, Ruby Wax.
- Used as the basis of programmes to combat stress: Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn.
- Adopted by multi-national corporations, including Apple and Google.
- Taught in schools and universities (Oxford Mindfulness Centre).
- The basis of academic study: MA in Mindfulness Studies (Lesley University, U.S.A.)
- Even beginning to be available on the NHS...

How does it work? “Be here now”

- In paying attention to one's present experience, one is less likely to be distracted or drawn into fruitless rumination about the past or the future.
- One may experience a calming of one's mind, a lessening of anxious, excited or agitated thinking.
- Stepping back from judgement creates a space for compassion – for oneself and for others.
- **MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING:** gently focus attention on the breath ('skilful object'), rather than thoughts that draw us into the future or the past.

Mindfulness in a Buddhist Context

"Mindfulness (*sati*) is the process of bearing something in mind, be it remembered or present before the senses or mind, with clear awareness. It is defined as 'not floating away'.., that is, an awareness which does not drift along the surface of things, but is a thorough observation. One can be mindful of the passing sensations involved in the action of lifting an arm, or of changing feelings as they pass through the mind. Either way, mindfulness observes without judgement, without habitual reaction, but clearly acknowledges what is actually there in the flow of experience, noting its nature. It has been described as a kind of 'bare attention' which sees things as if for the first time. It is by mindfulness, for example, that one clearly remembers a dream, without confusion and without elaborating the dream further. Mindfulness is crucial to the process of meditation because, without its careful observation, one cannot see things 'as they really are'."

Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.246 [my emphases].

ENLIGHTENMENT

'SEEING THINGS AS THEY REALLY ARE':

- Free from delusion
- Free from hatred
- Free from greed.

Mindfulness in a Buddhist Context

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH:

WISDOM (1-2)

MORAL VIRTUE (3-5)

MEDITATIVE CULTIVATION OF
THE HEART/MIND (*citta*) (6-8)

1. RIGHT VIEW OR UNDERSTANDING
2. RIGHT DIRECTED THOUGHT
3. RIGHT SPEECH
4. RIGHT ACTION
5. RIGHT LIVELIHOOD
6. RIGHT EFFORT
7. RIGHT MINDFULNESS
8. RIGHT CONCENTRATION

What about Poetry?

- ...the process of bearing something in mind...
- ...an awareness which does not drift along the surface of things, but is a thorough observation...
- ...mindfulness observes without judgement, without habitual reaction, but clearly acknowledges what is actually there in the flow of experience, noting its nature...

William Carlos Williams, "The Term" (1937)



A rumpled sheet
of brown paper
about the length

and apparent bulk
of a man was
rolling with the

wind slowly over
and over in
the street as

a car drove down
Upon it and
Crushed it to

the ground. Unlike
a man it rose
again rolling

with the wind over
and over to be as
it was before.

'observing thoroughly' an object
that might easily be overlooked.

Attention is focused away from
the human world – an absence of
'judgement'.

A turning away from *allegory* and
symbolism

Poem as an **outcome of mindful**
attention (poet) but also an
object of mindful attention
(reader)

Poetry and Mindfulness

Poem as the **outcome of mindfulness** – careful observation without judgement on the part of the poet.

Poem as the **object of the reader's attention**, encouraging and enabling mindfulness in the reader

Reader becomes a (mindfully) **active participant** in the practice of poetry:

"Cleaving close to the ground rules by which all language is made, good poetry carries broad information within brief speech. Image in particular, by gathering many energies toward a single end, creates an intense compression of meaning; it carries into the mind the solidity, particularity, and multifacetedness of actual objects. Such concreteness is a handle: **it can be grasped. It must be turned.** That turning opens the reader into a place of enlarged awareness, where different connotations may resonate together. Before the slipperiness of unformed thought, the image offers purchase; to the stolidity of things, it offers imagination's alchemical, stirring powers."

Jane Hirshfield, "Poetry and the Mind of Indirection" in *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (HarperCollins, 1997), p.114.

Don McKay, "Some Functions of a Leaf",
from *Field Marks: The Poetry of Don McKay* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006)

Figurative Language –
personification

Transformation – in natural
processes and in language ('word' to
'wood') [Buddhism: Impermanence]

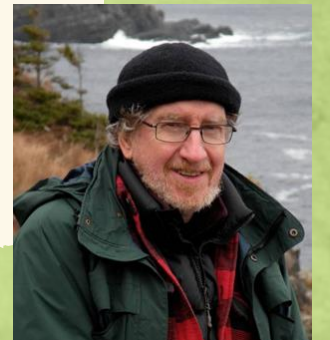
Reframing our sense of time –

Reframing our attitudes to
(Im)mortality

To whisper. To applaud the wind
and hide the Hermit thrush.
To catch the light
and work the humble spell of photosynthesis
(excuse me sir, if I might have one word)
by which it's changed to wood.
To wait
willing to feed
and be food.

To die with style:
as the tree retreats inside itself,
shutting off the valves at its
extremities
to starve in technicolour, then
having served two hours in a children's leaf pile, slowly
stir its vitamins into the earth.

To be the artist of mortality.



John Keats, "Ode to a Grecian Urn" (1795 – 23rd February 1821)



Whereas McKay's poem offers us an organic form to celebrate mortality as part of a natural process, Keats looks to a work of art as the only kind of immortality possible.

O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

[1819, final stanza]

Mindful Poetry – reconnecting with the rest of nature?

“Poetry, a very old and ultraportable piece of technology, can help to stave off tendencies to mindlessness, can cultivate empathy – can even help us think ecologically at a time when we most desperately need to think in systems but instead are encouraged to think in bits and bytes.”

Bryan Walpert, *Poetry and Mindfulness: Interruption to a Journey* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p.6.

Mindfulness and Poetry?

- Mindfulness is a quality or activity that can be fruitful in the composition of poetry;
- Equally, it is a state that might arise in the process of writing poetry, an effect.
- Mindfulness as a quality or activity is also something that a reader or listener might bring to or cultivate in relation to poetry.
- Equally, it is a state that might arise in the reading of or listening to poetry.
- Both poetry and mindfulness have the potential to return us to the world and to ourselves, with “enlarged awareness”.

Works Cited

Harvey, Peter, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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